

The Need for Speed

**RAPID LEARNING
ALTERS TRAINING
DESIGN AND DELIVERY.**

By Michael Laff



One state welfare agency in the northeastern United States recently introduced a new database to collect data on welfare applicants. Prior to implementation no one in the office was properly trained to navigate from one screen to the next. When employees were unable to exit an initial data field, a shortcut was found whereby users could code in '1' and proceed to the next screen.

Unfortunately, the shortcut created a new set of problems. Suddenly, welfare officials were led to believe, mistakenly, that many aid applicants were illiterate. The cost to retrain staff to use the database properly was enormous, according to Karl Kapp, a faculty member at Bloomsburg University, who consulted the state agency.



“Nobody’s stopping to take the time to train,” Kapp says. “Unfortunately, software companies are not good at training people. Once they sell the product, they walk away.

When training departments are involved from the beginning on software design, organizations fare much better.”

Cautionary tales about workplace inefficiency caused by an inadequate training regimen are all too common, according to learning consultants. Training can be delivered much faster, thanks to numerous technological innovations, but whether it is more effective is another question. One of the latest buzzwords in training is “rapid learning,” which refers to learning products that can be developed quickly and inexpensively. While traditional courseware development timelines can be measured in terms of months, rapid e-learning timelines are measured in terms of days and weeks.

“When e-learning was introduced around 1999, the driver was low cost,” says John Higgins, an executive with Accenture Learning in Dallas. “During the last seven years we’ve seen the power of greater reach. Companies are asking for more (content) in a shorter time. Speed has shifted the dynamic.”

Analysts believe rapid learning offers great promise if the available technology is wedded with the learning styles of staff members and the practical needs of particular jobs. The same pitfalls will reappear in training design if leaders fail to view training as a vital business component instead of a necessary evil.

Besides the demand for quick training on everyday business applications, Kapp noted a spike in demand among organizations that seek rapid learning to address sales training for companies that continually launch new products, compliance training for Sarbanes-Oxley requirements, or international compliance regulations for companies doing business overseas.

Short order

Organizations are banking on rapid learning methods as a way to accelerate implementation of new business services. Sending large contingents of staff to classes is costly and ineffective. Yet many instructional designers believe that e-learning is still struggling to meet the demands of rapid training. E-learning and other technology-driven solutions are filling the gap even as employees encounter speed bumps along the way.

Faster does not always mean better. As the delivery methods of training are accelerating, the old questions about maintaining the integrity of the learning environment persist. Is training delivered online more effective than a classroom just because it costs less? Most training experts would answer “no.” E-learning is acquiring a poor reputation in some circles because it is pressed into service without effective design.

“Rapid training gets it done faster, but it raises just as many questions about quality,” says Edmond Manning, a learning consultant with Minneapolis-based Allen Interactive. “We’ve created another fast food culture. We need to ask whether it is nutritious as well. People have been subjected to some horrible online learning experiences.”

At its best, rapid learning can solve the problem of training a pool of employees on a procedural issue in a consistent, cost-efficient format. At its worst, rapid learning is just repackaged training manuals presented in an online format. An e-learning module may be designed with the best intentions and slick technology but it may fail to engage the learner.

If both employer and employee can agree on one aspect that is contributing to the demand for rapid learning, it is that neither side wants to spend all day in a seminar or three hours taking an online course. Businesses want a cost-effective means of training, while employees want some method that teaches them to do their jobs and helps them in a time of need.

“To take somebody out of the work environment and put them in a classroom for four hours is not where the world is going,” Higgins says. “The secret sauce is how you bundle it together and package it. There are a new set of resources for learning organizations to use so that they can become more like systems integrators rather than instructional designers.”

The environments offered by iPods, YouTube, and reality-based training games heighten users’ expectations. In some ways, trainers need to act more like entertainment impresarios

by using tools and games to heighten the learning experience. Learning consultants acknowledge that training materials are often unimaginative and fail to engage the user because they are the work of software designers, not instructional designers.

Besides being dull, another frequent complaint lodged against training applications is their complexity for the end user. Analysts point to a lack of collaboration between designers, trainers, and end users. Kapp advises trainers who are designing rapid learning modules to take a cue from websites such as the Cartoon Network and Nick Jr. that, while designed for kids,

“There are tools that can decrease the time to develop, but I haven’t seen anything for design,” Kapp says. “The design phase is crucial. It’s the last part you should squeeze, but a lot of companies try to do it.”

An entire industry is emerging that can package specific training needs in multiple formats. Employees can choose the method they wish to obtain the content. One e-learning organization will record a lecture by a field expert, make the PowerPoint available on a server, and create a transcript of the lecture and break all of the lecture’s components into small MP3 files.

“We’ve created another fast food culture. We need to ask whether it is nutritious as well. People have been subjected to some horrible online learning experiences.”

Edmond Manning, Learning consultant, Allen Interactive

are easy to navigate. Too often, he says, e-learning and training modules lack the same simplicity. The only way to correct this flaw is to involve individuals who will be using the program in the initial design phase along with the training department.

“I’ve seen it happen over and over again in academia, corporations, and government,” Kapp says. “The developers of software don’t talk to the end user or the training department.”

Effective design will amount to little if an organization does not commit to a training schedule. Kapp worked with a major toy retailer that implemented new supply chain management software. As the final design continued to drag behind schedule, company leaders insisted on keeping training to the same timeline without any delays. As a result, employees were forced to train on a software system that was only 80 percent complete. Company leaders reasoned that to delay training would cause a loss in productivity because a significant expense was already incurred during the purchase and design phase, according to Kapp.

Kapp also cautions organizations that utilize time-sensitive databases in the course of business to embed a time-elapsing system within the training module. Too many companies use a generic training program that only teaches users how to enter data without teaching them the mechanics of responding to time-sensitive material. Programs such as Adobe’s Captivate can help users learn the intricacies of software without having to wait 60 or 90 days for an event to trigger required action.

Kapp compares the current dilemma of rapid learning demands to the quality control debate of the 1980s. Decades ago, organizations discovered it was no longer necessary to inspect the quality of every product; instead, it was more efficient to ensure the whole process was consistent. It is no longer necessary to design training for every application. Instead companies should focus on creating a consistent instructional design process to include team members from multiple departments.

As Higgins points out, some employees will want to view the entire lecture at once. Others, typically younger staff members, will opt for downloading MP3 files to listen to during the commute to work.

One retailer is using the popular Sims PC game as a model for training its sales staff. The game includes a number of different scenarios with the goal of upselling to encourage the customer to buy items in addition to the initial purchase. Development costs are roughly \$2 million, but improved sales figures would easily surpass the initial cost, Higgins says.

Design and delivery

Workplace learning and performance professionals trainers need to be cognizant of the changing needs of the next generation that was bred on the web and other portable devices. The old methods of training—preparing material for consumption all at once—will no longer be acceptable.

“It’s almost impossible to put the average twentysomething in front of a three-hour online course,” Higgins says. “We need to work more diligently to engage them in the learning process.”

To prevent employees from experiencing training fatigue, designers should be careful not to pile training materials upon staff all at once. Trainers could start the process by introducing a few tasks at a time via email messages, and then require employees to use the learning on the job. A few days later, trainers could send another block of programs for practice.

Additionally, instructional designers often focus too much on technological gimmicks instead of the end goal. Manning encourages organizations to think strategically about what employees need to perform their job effectively. If they are underperforming, the typical response is to provide training. Yet all that may be required is a job aid that provides direction on how to perform tasks. While that recommendation sounds obvious, Manning says most organizations fail to heed it.

“There needs to be some strategic thinking in terms of training delivery,” Manning says. “In most cases, once the delivery is done, all the material is shoved in their face. No wonder people are overwhelmed. It’s like being served all your food—the soup, salad, entrée, and dessert—all at once.”

Breaking educational and training materials into various pieces, also called “chunking” of content, is becoming a necessity to meet the needs of the next generation. It allows users to access only those chapters they wish to review at the time of need. For example, a company that introduces a number of new products continuously could videotape an interview with a product expert and make the interview available to the entire sales force.

Before launching a rapid learning module, organizations need to evaluate what tools would provide the best match with the preferred learning methods of the majority of its staff. The answer should combine the best available technology with the learning profile of the staff.

“There’s no question that long, intact, intensive learning materials are being replaced with shorter, judicious, more face-to-face resources,” says Allison Rossett, professor of educational technology at San Diego State University.

Examples of some effective tools include online discussion groups, video demonstrations from experts, and help sections that genuinely address the tasks that confuse most employees.

Rossett outlines three blended learning options for organizations. The first is what she calls the “anchor blend,” which is used by the U.S. Coast Guard. The method combines classroom instruction with an on-demand tool such as a PDA that is programmed with answers to typical on-the-job questions. Employees are taught how to use the resource tool as much as they are taught content in class.

The second method is the “bookend blend,” which combines reading materials with classroom and an online discussion community. This is best suited for groups that may be more resistant to learning or require greater supervision. The third and final category is for the highly motivated, independent learners such as a sales force. Called the “field blend,” this email method directs learners to e-learning courses, online coaching, discussion boards, and other materials in a cafeteria-style format.

“You need prepared canned assets and you need to continually update the richness of the system,” Rossett explains.

There is some resistance to changes in e-learning, notably from traditional classroom instructors. Rossett notes that some instructors in government agencies and the manufacturing sector fear that their contributions will be reduced as learning content moves to online modules or on-demand resources.

The future of rapid learning depends upon the technology used in a particular workspace. PDAs and cell phones are still in their infancy in terms of their capacity to deliver sophisticated content in a clear fashion. Workers in manufacturing or in call centers are unlikely to have a laptop that is continuously wired to the web. Still, analysts expect more integration between daily tasks and learning tools in the near future.

“Five years from now learning will be embedded in a person’s workflow,” Higgins says. “Right now we’re at a transformation point where there is experimentation with form, fit, and function.”

“When e-learning was introduced around 1999, the driver was low cost. During the last seven years we’ve seen the power of reach. Companies are asking for more (content) in a shorter time. Speed has shifted the dynamic.”

John Higgins, Executive, Accenture Learning

Message versus medium

If there is a real weak spot with rapid learning modules, it is in the design, analysts believe. Harnessing the technology poses one challenge, but the greater hurdle is thinking creatively during the design stage.

“Most e-learning is just text and multiple choice questions,” Manning says. “That’s not the limitation of the media. It’s the limitation of the designer. People think it’s an interactive learning tool just because it asks questions.”

Manning predicts that the warp speed development of new technologies will continually raise the expectations of end users. Just as video made its entry into training in the 1980s, digital technology is changing the training field, notably through high-quality simulated games. As more employees become discriminating customers of the Internet, they will no longer tolerate poor interfaces that resemble PowerPoint presentations online. The rush to videotape executives on grainy video drew ridicule from viewers. Organizations need to be savvy enough to keep pace with user expectations.

“Expectations are really high,” he says. “We’re all becoming expert consumers of the web, and people won’t tolerate poor interfaces or low-quality features just because of tight budgets. If the graphics are poor, people will say the training is poor.”

Michael Laff is an associate editor for T+D; mlaff@astd.org.